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SUBJECT: TURKEY: GOT FLOATS ISRAEL-LEBANON TALKS DURING
SULEIMAN VISIT

Classified By: POL Counselor Daniel O'Grady, for reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Michel Suleiman, the first Lebanese president to visit Turkey since the signing of the Baghdad Pact in 1955, met with President Gul, PM Erdogan, and Parliament Speaker Toptan during his April 22-23 trip to Ankara. The visit was more ceremonial than substantive. Suleiman thanked the Turkish government for its peace efforts in Lebanon and the region. Most discussions were dedicated to enhancing trade and economic ties. During one-on-one meetings, however, Gul and Erdogan queried the possibility of facilitating indirect Israel-Lebanon talks. Suleiman responded that the GOI must first meet certain criteria before the GOL would consider the proposal. End Summary.

¶2. (C) The primary purpose of Suleiman's visit was to thank Turkey for its efforts to resolve the 2008 Lebanese political crisis and to further enhance the bilateral relationship, Lebanese Charge d, Affairs Wajib Abdel Samad told us. Suleiman personally thanked Erdogan his role in advancing the Doha Agreement. He solicited GOT assistance in normalizing bilateral relations with Syria and requested Turkey's continued support as a non-permanent UNSC member, particularly regarding issues related security in southern Lebanon. MFA Syria desk officer Ceyhun Erciyes added that Suleiman praised Turkey's role in the Middle East peace process, citing the Israeli-Syria indirect talks specifically. In addition, the two governments signed five standard cooperation agreements: military training, tourism, youth and culture, technological standardization, and health.

¶3. (C) Samad noted that both Erdogan and Gul tested the water on the possibility of Turkey initiating indirect talks between Israel and Lebanon during their brief tete-a-tetes with Suleiman. The Lebanese President underscored that before GOL would be willing to entertain such a proposal, the Israeli government would need to: 1) respect the terms of the 1949 armistice agreement; 2) accept that Palestinians should not be naturalized into Lebanon; and 3) agree to return Shebaah farms. In larger meetings, Turkish officials reiterated their continued support for the UNIFIL mission and humanitarian assistance projects that include schools (the total number of which will reach 75 by the end of 2009), hospitals, and other infrastructure initiatives. The GOT also announced it will send eight monitors to Lebanon for the June general elections.

¶4. (C) The larger discussions between the delegations focused primarily on economic and trade issues, reported Erciyes. GOT officials pressured the Lebanese Government to begin negotiating a free trade agreement. Samad noted that the GOL has danced around the issue for quite some time, repeatedly stating it would "consider" the proposal. Suleiman offered

an ambiguous commitment to "begin in due time," a notable departure from the standard response. Erciyes commented that the GOL has the virtually same agreement with the EU and the GOL is dragging its feet over the concerns of a handful of Lebanese industrialists.

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Jeffrey